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THE EIGHTH-GRADE VOCABULARY

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Whether the relationship be that of cause to effect, of effect to cause, or of mixed cause and effect, the fact is very evident that broad scholarship, and even mere general culture, is always accompanied by the mastery of a wide vocabulary. This fact seems not to have entered the consciousness of the makers of our common-school courses of study, for such courses are usually constructed wholly without reference to this or other basic facts of language acquirement.

It would seem that inductive reasoning might long ago have cleared up finally the problem of language teaching; but inductive reasoning seems to have done little in a practical way, and theories rather than facts confront us on every side. For this reason, it may be wise to seek a solution for our problem deductively, and this article is a frank attempt to present facts which may help us to infer a few fundamental principles.

That there is a language problem, no one can deny. Our schools still turn out a product which is weakest on the side of language-use and of literary comprehension. It is even doubtful whether the tremendous question of truancy will not largely be solved when the language-training problem is solved. When one visits a school made up of so-called "incorrigibles," and finds that every one of the hapless lot is so unskilled in reading, writing, and spelling as to be hopelessly behind grade, he begins to get light on the relationship between so-called "incorrigibility" and two of the three R's. But this is aside from our main discussion.

As yet, the essential relationship between vocabulary and general education is not recognized in textbooks or in courses of study. With more light on the subject we shall have new methods. The prevailing ignorance and misconceptions are so

absurd as to be almost appalling. Partly to be blamed for this is the fictitious tradition sprung upon a gullible public by Dean Alvord of otherwise revered memory. This worthy but most credulous gentleman stated that the working men of his acquaintance used scarcely two hundred words in all. Now if the dean had but followed up one of his working friends with pencil and pad in hand, he would soon have found out what a poor guesser he himself had been. Unluckily for posterity, the dean's poor guess has become almost a classic among famous errors.

The extreme ignorance prevailing upon the subject of vocabulary, even among well-educated persons, is shown by the statement of a well-known American educational writer who boldly claimed that a man may converse very well with a vocabulary of only seventy-five words. Ridiculous as is such a statement, the ever-unscientific public gulps it down with avidity and sighs comfortably in the assurance that it has seventy-five usable ideas all tagged with their proper word-signs. It does not occur to the public—who prefer ideas and clothes both ready-to-wear—that the baby of eighteen months is usually in good command of more than seventy-five words, yet is not able to “converse very well.”

Some light is shed on this subject by the fact that the average primer presents about three hundred fifty words for the six-year-old to learn to recognize. The most ambitious primer offers about one thousand, but this is exceptional. No one has had the enterprise as yet to ascertain how many words are actually necessary to a comprehension of first-grade subjects, of those in the second grade, in the third grade, and so on. But these facts will some day become known, and in that day the mechanics who tinker theoretical courses of study will begin to recognize the essential relation between general scholarship and mastery of the vernacular.

As one small contribution to the almost unknown field of language-fact which we are bound to explore if American school children shall come into their heritage of literary appreciation, I offer here one collection of data. In order to help determine approximately the necessary vocabulary of the successful eighth-

grade pupil, I have compiled—with no small pains, be assured—the actual vocabulary used in a popular and excellent modern textbook in United States history. (I do not name the text, but will do so by letter upon request.)

TABLE SHOWING UNDER EACH LETTER OF THE ALPHABET
(a) the TWO FIRST AND THE TWO LAST WORDS USED
IN A POPULAR TEXT IN UNITED STATES HISTORY AND
(b) THE WHOLE NUMBER OF SUCH WORDS

A.	abandon, abdication awful, awkward.....	343
B.	baby, bachelors by, byway.....	280
C.	cabal, cabbage cutlery, cylinder.....	507
D.	daguerreotype, daily dwelt, dying.....	293
E.	each, eager extravagant, extreme.....	215
F.	fabrics, face fury, future.....	269
G.	gag, gain gunpowder, gymnastics.....	123
H.	habits, habitual huzzahs, hymn.....	184
I.	ice, idea isthmus, itself.....	190
J.	jackets, jail justice, justify.....	32
K.	keenly, keep known, know-nothings.....	29
L.	labor, labor-saving lumbering, luxury.....	139
M.	machines, machinery mutually, mysterious.....	207
N.	navigation, navigators nurses, nut.....	95
O.	oak, oar owners, ox.....	124
P.	paces, pacific push, put.....	341
Q.	quaint, Quaker quit-rent, quorum.....	24
R.	rabble, raccoon runner, rush.....	319
S.	Sabbath, sachem system, systematic.....	655
T.	tables, tablet tyranny, tyrant.....	359
U.	ugly, unable utmost, utter.....	96
V.	vacate, vacancies vote, voyages.....	50
W.	wading, wage-earners wrong, wrote.....	163
Y.	yards, yarn your, yours.....	16
Z.	zeal, zigzag, zone.....	3
<hr/>		
Total		5,036
Proper names not counted above.....		909
<hr/>		
Final total		5,965

To the 5,036 words in the lists are added 909 proper names also used. Many words were used as two or three different parts of speech, and hence were counted more than once. The

total is 5,965. So many words must the eighth-grader know who studies intelligently the book in question.

But the eighth-grade child must know far more than the words of his textbook in history. There is a special vocabulary attached to each of his other studies, including many words not contained in the history text, and he recites in geography, grammar, writing, arithmetic, music, physical culture, drawing, cooking, sewing, and perhaps gardening. How shall we estimate the contribution to his usable ideas gained through each of these subjects?

The question may be attacked from another side. A certain Minnesota superintendent kindly consented to test the vocabulary of a few eighth-grade pupils. These went through their small high-school dictionaries, counting word by word all that they felt sure they knew and might have used. Of four pupils who made the test, three claimed between nine and ten thousand words, exclusive of proper names, and one, a very strong student of excellent Scotch parentage, estimated for himself nearly fifteen thousand words. These figures tally well with the reports upon vocabularies published by the one or two lone explorers in the field of high-school vocabularies, and lead us to the conclusion that the eighth-grade student who completes his work successfully must possess from ten to fifteen thousand words.

Will the reader ponder on the question where and how pupils are to learn this matter of six thousand words which they will need when they come to study history? Are they to wrestle with both the history and a new vocabulary and be thereby handicapped, or does the course of study afford opportunity for the pleasant and gradual absorption of a wide vocabulary? If not, why not?